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Bull, University of Wis.

Extension Division

Social Center Movement

BULLETIN OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
Serial No. 465; General Series No. 302

EXTENSION DIVISION

OF

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

GENERAL INFORMATION AND WELFARE

THE SOCIAL CENTER MOVEMENT

Address delivered before The First National Conference on Civic and Social Center Development, at Madison, Wis., October 25, 1911, by Josiah Strong, DD., President of The Social Center Association of America.

PRICE, 5 CENTS

MADISON
Published by the University
November, 1911

Entered as second class matter, June 10, 1898, at the post-office at Madison, Wisconsin, under the Act of July 16, 1894.

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UNIVERSITY EXTENSION DIVISION
Department of General Information and Welfare

MADISON, WIS.

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THE SOCIAL CENTER MOVEMENT

Address delivered by Josiah Strong, D. D., President of the Social Center Association of America, before the First National Conference on Civic and Social Center Development, at Madison, Wis., Oct. 25, 1911.

It is of the utter fitness of things that this first meeting of a new and, we believe, most significant social movement should be in this state and in this university building, as the guests of Madison and of Wisconsin University, a university which, touching great social questions, the vital questions of our times, is the most progressive, the most influential of any university in the western hemisphere. And let me say, sirs, that Wisconsin University is what it is, because Wisconsin state is what it is. The

state made the university possible, and the university, on its part, has served to mould the state. I seriously question whether there is another state in all the union where this university might exist unmodified. It is indeed fitting that such a gathering should be the guests of such a university and at the capital city of such a state.

There are many scores and hundreds of national gatherings in the United States in the course of a year, representing religious communions, political parties, industrial interests; capital on the one hand, labor on the other, but these great gatherings represent special classes or special interests. This gathering is unique in the fact that it represents all the people—the Social Center represents all the people in all those interests which are common to all.

Common Interests—The Great Interests

Let me first emphasize the fact that these common interests are by far the greatest interests of humanity, and precisely the interests which have been very commonly neglected. Class interests are looked after by classes, but what is everybody's business is nobody's business. I believe as your Chief Executive has said, that this movement marks the beginning of a new era; it is no ordinary occasion, no every day affair when a national gathering assembles to look after the great neglected common interests of the community.

If we were in South America sailing on the waters of Titicaca, nearly 13,000 feet up in the air, we should see on the eastern shore of the lake, foothills touched with green, and back of them and appearing above them, a mountain range, blue-black, meeting the clouds, and if we were fortunate and that cloud curtain should roll up, it would reveal to us high above the foothills, high above the blue-black range, the glorious snow covered

summits of the Andes. We find this majestic range rising in seven separate peaks from Illimani on the south, 21,000 feet high, to Sorato on the north, which is nearly 25,000 feet, shouldering out the sky. The valleys in between at the base of these seven peaks I estimate must be some 18,000 feet above the sea, three or four thousand feet higher than the tops of Colorado's noblest mountains, but these valleys have no name, it is the Seven Peaks that have gained, each a name and fame; but what would their four or five or six thousand feet above the range serve to give them name and fame did they not rest down upon the mighty bulk of that majestic range?

The Lincolns and Washingtons, the Gladstones and Bismarcks, the Shakespeares and Goethes, the Beethovens and Wagners, the Titians and the Raphaels, the Bacons, the Pasteurs, the Liszt, are the mountain peaks that have won each a lasting name and fame; but those qualities which distinguished them from us would serve little purpose if they did not rest down upon those qualities which they possess in common with all humanity. These great peaks of humanity have more in common with us than in difference, and it is these common qualities which the social center movement recognizes and emphasizes.

The World Moving Toward Democracy

The future belongs to democracy. Witness the absolutism of Russia, of Turkey, of Prussia, of China, feeling after constitutional government. They need not hope to achieve in a generation what it cost our fathers hundreds of years to gain. You cannot extemporize liberty and free institutions, but nevertheless it is the universal fact that Demos is feeling after liberty. The future belongs to the people and it is high time that the people should have in every neighborhood a university where the people may gain self-education that shall fit them for their high responsibilities.

There are two ways of looking at humanity. Goethe said "There is something in every man's heart which, if we knew it, would make us hate him." Walt Whitman was once asked, "Do you hate such a man?" "Hate him? No. How can I hate him? I know him." These two attitudes toward human nature are typical. If it be true, as I believe, that there is more in human nature to love than to hate, then the people by coming into close contact with one another, becoming really acquainted with one another, will increase their mutual respect and lay broader and securer foundations on which to build popular government.

Acquaintance Necessary for Self Government

A strong czar or a strong sultan might rule successfully a hundred races with bitter prejudices, with religious animosities, speaking different tongues, but how shall a hundred different races govern themselves if they do not know each other, if they do not speak the same tongue? Popular government implies common interests, common action. How is this possible unless men know each other?

I believe, sir, that this extension of the university over the whole state, these university extensions to which you have made reference, have values which it would be difficult to over-estimate, we cannot even enumerate them, but let us touch very lightly on two or three. For hundreds of years men have hated and hunted and burned one another for the love of God. We no longer hunt and burn one another, for this is an age of toleration in religion, though evidently some hate one another still, because they bear different names. What would you think, good friends, of a family whose members *tolerated* one another, what would you think of brothers who *tolerated* one another? I believe that there is to be a realization

of brotherhood in humanity, such that toleration will become intolerable, and I believe that, gathering in a Social Center where men come to know each other, is a long step in this direction.

The View Depends on the View Point

We have modern pillared saints much like those of old—men who were pedestaled thirty or fifty years ago, and have stayed there ever since. As they look about the world, they see that they are at the precise center of the horizon, and as they look up, each sees that heaven is exactly over him. Now let our pillared saint climb down from his pillar, let him go over and talk with those other fellows over there and he will make a discovery; he will discover that those other eyes were at the center of the horizon, and he will discover that the zenith was exactly over those men as well; he is a larger man.

I remember some years ago Governor Wilson, then President Wilson, made this remark to me: "I have often thought," said he, "that if I could have an answer to but one prayer it should be this, 'Oh, Lord, make all the fools bad men'." The longer you ruminate on that, the juicier it will grow. It is because the fools are good men that they get a following; very commonly, they are trusted because they are recognized as good men; they would be distrusted if they were obviously bad men. Men who wish to help humanity must not be simply good, but wise. Gregg, the essayist, remarks "It is one of the principal duties of the wise to counteract the efforts of the good." It is high time for the good to become wise. And touching social problems, I know of no better way to become wise than to become acquainted with the view points of other people, not only of scholars, but of those whose wisdom, especially, was trusted by Abraham Lincoln.

The Social Center a Common Institution

It goes without saying that the Social Center by its very nature cannot become sectarian. I believe that this acquaintance which must inevitably come from gathering in the Social Centers, capitalists with working men, the literate with the illiterate, the "society" women with the working women, the representatives of Protestantism and Catholicism and Judaism—must result not only in better government but also in a truer religious sympathy. Men belonging to the same neighborhood cannot thus come together to study their common interests, seek to remove common nuisances, without increasing their mutual respect, and as they grow in intelligence regarding political need and political method, our politics will feel the result. But of course it would be a contradiction in terms for the Social Center to become partisan as it would be for the Social Center to become sectarian.

These are great times in which we are living, awakening times, beginning times. I want to congratulate the students who are here on being young with the century. I devoutly believe you are living in the greatest period of all history and in the land of supremest opportunity, because this is the supreme transitional period of all the ages, from individualistic civilization to a social or collective civilization, and it is the great transitional periods which have been the periods of great opportunity; the mighty hinges of history on which have turned the destinies of states, of nations, of civilizations.

This is the age of democracy, and ours is the duty of showing the way to the Democracy of the World. In an important sense this so-called new world is the old world today, and Asia is the new world. Like pupils to a teacher they are sending their representatives to the United States to learn from our experience. For the great problems of

the new civilization are farther developed here than elsewhere in all the world, and we have facilities for solving these problems that exist nowhere else in all the world.

Think of one of them, for instance, the race problem. There has always been more or less of race antipathy, heightened by religious prejudice, and to this, must now be added, economic competition. Races representing different civilizations, having radically different standards of living, are getting together in competition, and intensifying the prejudice. That problem must be solved before the brotherhood of man can prevail, before the kingdom of God can come in the earth, before America can be realized.

We have in this country more citizens of foreign birth than all the other countries and all the world combined. They are here and this is the great laboratory where must be solved this mighty problem, the relation of races to each other. Where can it better be done than in the Social Center, where men meet, not as belonging to a class or to a race, but simply as belonging to humanity, where we meet as men?

I believe that we in America are not only engaged in the statesmanlike work of moulding a nation, but we are engaged in the God-like work of shaping a world and to find and grasp a tool for this common task is the aim of the Social Center movement.

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